

# A Right to Housing

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## Foundation for a New Social Agenda

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## 15 Responses to Homelessness: Past Policies, Future Directions, and a Right to Housing

WHEN HOMELESSNESS reemerged as a significant social issue in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s, three questions dominated public debate: how many, who and why? The range of answers to these questions corresponded to a variety of proposed responses to homelessness, from those that stressed changes in the behavior of individual homeless people to those that called for systemic, social solutions. Since that time, a degree of consensus has been reached on those initial key questions, and the need for some form of government response is accepted; with that evolution, debate has shifted to a discussion of the nature of that response. In the early years of the new century, a resurgence of interest in policy responses has begun to come forth at the federal, state and local levels, along with a new focus on policies to end and prevent homelessness.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the initial debates dominating the response to homelessness and their implications for policy. We then briefly discuss the ways in which local, state and federal governments have helped to create large-scale homelessness and then examine responses to the crisis. We consider the extent to which these responses aimed at ameliorating the conditions of homeless life, aiding exit from homelessness or preventing homelessness, and discuss the evolution of government responses to homelessness, noting that the limited amount of funding available has made true prevention strategies relatively rare. In the last half of the chapter, we discuss the strategies that are most promising, building on existing programmatic successes but emphasizing the role of housing to

a far greater extent than government responses to homelessness have done thus far.

### THE 1980s: EARLY QUESTIONS, DEBATE AND POLICY RESPONSES

The question of the size of the homeless population generated much controversy in the early 1980s, at times dominating public debate on the issue. As a political matter, the size of the homeless population had important policy implications: If there were only a few homeless people, locally or nationally, then it could be argued that government had little or no obligation to act. But by the late 1980s, even those who had at first minimized the problem could no longer deny that the numbers were quite large in comparison to the preceding 40 years. By most accounts, between half a million and a million Americans were “literally homeless” (meaning in shelters or on the streets) every night—perhaps several millions if the count were expanded to include “hidden homeless” populations as well. A study by Bruce Link and his colleagues (1994) estimated that an astounding 3 percent of the U.S. population had been literally homeless at some time between 1985 and 1990.

Who, then, were these homeless people? Were they hippies, alcoholics and addicts? Mothers with children or unemployed working people? Were they members of the “deserving” or “undeserving” poor? Again, there were policy implications. For instance, if homeless people were “transients,” then local government could argue that it had little responsibility to them. If

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